

## John 21:1-14 Jesus Manifests HIMSELF

### Introduction

Over the past few weeks, we've seen Jesus come first of all to Mary Magdalene at the tomb, and then to the disciples when they were gathered behind closed doors, and then again to the disciples when Thomas was with them. Now we come to the epilogue of John's Gospel, chapter twenty-one.

**I. John 21:1** — After these things Jesus manifested Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias [the Sea of Galilee], and He manifested Himself in this way.

The NIV says: "Afterward Jesus **appeared** again to his disciples, by the Sea of Galilee. It **happened** this way." But John doesn't say that Jesus "appeared." He says that Jesus "manifested Himself." And John doesn't say, "It happened this way." He purposefully repeats the language he's just used: "And He manifested Himself in this way." In verse fourteen, John will bookend this entire section by saying again:

- John 21:14 — This is now the third time that Jesus was **manifested** to the disciples, after He was raised from the dead.

"Manifested" is another "John" word.<sup>1</sup> It has the sense of unveiling something that was previously hidden or unknown.

- 1 John 1:1-2 (cf. 2:19) — What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life— and the life was **manifested**, and we have seen and bear witness and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was **manifested** to us...

So what does John have in mind when He says that Jesus manifested Himself? In chapter one, John the Baptist said of the one who came after him and yet ranked before him (cf. 1:30):

- John 1:31 (cf. 7:4) — "I did not know Him, but so that He might be **manifested** to Israel, I came baptizing with water."

The emphasis here is on the saving manifestation of Jesus as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29). In chapter two, after telling how Jesus had turned the water into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee, John concluded:

- John 2:11 — Jesus did this in Cana of Galilee as the beginning of His *signs*, and **manifested** His glory, and His disciples *believed* in Him.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew and Luke never use this word while Mark uses it only three times (4:22; 16:12, 14). John uses this word a total of nine times (and another nine times in just five chapters in 1 John).

The point here is the unveiling of a “glory” that was otherwise hidden — a glory to which the disciples respond by believing. In chapter nine, Jesus said of the man born blind:

- John 9:3 — “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this was so that the works of God might be **manifested** in him.”

Here again, what is about to be *manifested* is the saving power of God who gives sight not just to the physically blind, but even to the spiritually blind. When the eyes of the blind man are opened he will see Jesus savingly and believe in Him and worship Him (9:35-41). In chapter seventeen, in the prayer that Jesus prayed, He said:

- John 17:6 — “I have **manifested** Your name to the men whom You gave Me out of the world.”

Here again, what we have is the manifesting of God’s saving grace and power (His name) which calls forth saving faith in the hearts of those that the Father has given the Son. Are you beginning to feel the wonderful “weight” of this word, “manifested,” as it’s used in John’s Gospel?

In the days of His fleshly weakness, strictly speaking Jesus never manifested *Himself*.<sup>2</sup> Just to look at Jesus as He walked by on the road or as He taught in the synagogue was to see (or perceive) nothing more than a man, no different from any other man. Jesus did manifest His glory in word and deed (1:14; 2:11), but that was different from manifesting *Himself*. After all, He was there with His disciples all the time (He wasn’t hidden), and He was there with them sharing in their fleshly weakness (Heb. 5:7; cf. 1 Cor. 15:42-49).

But now what do we read in chapter 21? “After these things Jesus **manifested *Himself* again** to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias... This is now **the third time** that *Jesus* was **manifested** to the disciples, after He was raised from the dead.” Now, whenever Jesus “appears,” this appearance is “automatically” (by default) a *manifestation of Himself* — not just bodily to physical eyes, but spiritually to eyes of faith. Now every “appearance” of Jesus is a *manifestation* of His saving power and glory.

Remember that on the one hand there’s an essential continuity between the body of Jesus that was laid in the tomb and the body of the resurrected Jesus. The same body that was laid in the tomb has now been raised up. On the other hand, there’s a fundamental discontinuity between the body of Jesus that was laid in the tomb and the body of the resurrected Jesus. Jesus has been raised up in a body that’s no longer susceptible to death. Therefore, the resurrection of Jesus has brought about a wholly new reality in the history of the world — even since before Adam and Eve fell. It’s the beginning of a new creation (1 Cor. 15:35-57). So we remember the words of the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:

- 1 Corinthians 15:47 — The first man is from the earth, earthy; the second *man* is from *heaven*.

And then in 2 Corinthians chapter 5:

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<sup>2</sup> Except, perhaps, uniquely in the Transfiguration (Mat. 17:1-8).

- 2 Corinthians 5:16–17 — Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer. Therefore if anyone is **in Christ**, he is a **new creation**.

This is a wonderful mystery. But there's more. When Jesus wasn't manifesting Himself to His disciples, where was He? Was He living hidden or in secret somewhere else in Judea or Galilee? This isn't an idle question. In the New Testament, the resurrection of Jesus is of one piece with His ascension and enthronement at the right hand of God.

- Ephesians 1:20 (cf. Acts 2:32-33; 5:30-31; 1 Pet. 3:21-22 [see also Eph. 2:6; Col. 3:1]) — [May] you... know what is... the surpassing greatness of His power... which He worked in Christ, by **raising** Him from the dead and **seating** Him at His right hand in the heavenly places.

When after forty days Jesus ascended visibly into heaven, this marked the end of His earthly manifestations and so also the finality (or the completion) of His ascension until He comes again.<sup>3</sup> But this visible ascension wasn't the first time Jesus had returned to heaven. Remember Jesus' words to Mary Magdalene:

- John 20:17 — “Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended [*finally*] to the Father; but go to My brothers and say to them, ‘I am *ascending* to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God.’”

When Jesus wasn't manifesting Himself to His disciples, where was He? As “the second man [who] is from heaven” He was sitting enthroned in glory at the Father's right hand. Therefore, whenever Jesus appears to His disciples after His resurrection, He is—by default—*manifesting Himself* to them. Not only is He Himself now the beginning of the new creation, but He Himself is now also the one who sits at the right hand of God in the heavenly places. Here is a mystery revealed to us, and yet at the same time, a mystery too wonderful for us to ever fully comprehend. Now every appearance of Jesus is also, by default, a manifestation of Jesus in His saving power and glory — a manifestation, therefore, not just bodily to physical eyes, but spiritually to eyes of faith. Maybe now we can have an even greater appreciation for these words from John's first epistle:

- 1 John 3:2 — Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not been **manifested** as yet what we will be. We know that when He is **manifested** [at His second coming], we will be like Him, ***because we will see Him just as He is.***

With all this in mind, then, we return to our passage this morning: “After these things Jesus **manifested** Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias, and He **manifested *Himself in this way.***”

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 1:9-11; Mk. 16:19; but see also 1 Cor. 15:8; the other “appearances” seem to have been visions of Christ in heaven (Acts 7:56; Rev. 1:9-20)

**II. John 21:2–3a** — Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two others of His disciples were together. Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will also come with you.”

When Jesus last manifested Himself to the disciples, they were in Judea (Lk. 24:33-36; Jn. 20:19, 26). Now they’re in Galilee. Before Jesus died, He told the disciples:

➤ Matthew 26:32 — “After I have been raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.”

After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to the women who had come to the tomb and said to them:

➤ Matthew 28:10 (cf. 28:7) — “Do not be afraid; go and report to My brothers to leave for Galilee, and there they will see Me.”

At some point Jesus designated precisely when and where this meeting would happen. Matthew says:

➤ Matthew 28:16 (cf. 1 Cor. 15:6) — [T]he eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated.

Here in John 21, we have only seven of the disciples (not eleven), and they’re gathered not on a mountain but somewhere on the shores of the Sea of Galilee still waiting, apparently, for the time that Jesus had appointed (cf. Mat. 28:18-20). But what to do while they’re waiting?

“Simon Peter said to them [to Thomas, and Nathanael, and the sons of Zebedee, and the two other disciples], ‘I am going fishing.’ They said to him, ‘We will also come with you.’” In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Zebedee is first introduced always in connection with the naming of his sons (James and John) and their work as fishermen (Mk. 1:19; 3:16-17; Mat. 4:21; 10:2; Lk. 5:10). John, however, refers without any introduction at all to the unnamed “sons of Zebedee.”<sup>4</sup> He’s assuming a knowledge of the “Tradition” preserved in the earlier synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) where we learn that Zebedee was a wealthy fisherman and that before they left their father to follow Jesus Zebedee’s sons had worked with him in the family business, and were, in fact, partners in the fishing business with Simon Peter. When John refers without any introduction to the “sons of Zebedee,” he’s assuming a knowledge more specifically of that part of the “Tradition” preserved for us only in the Gospel of Luke.

➤ Luke 5:1–11 (cf. Mk. 1:19-20) — Now it happened that while the crowd was pressing around [Jesus] and listening to the word of God, He was standing at the edge of the lake of Gennesaret [the Sea of Galilee]; and He saw two boats lying at the edge of the lake, and the fishermen, having gotten out of them, were washing their nets. And He got into one of the boats, which was Simon’s, and asked him to put out a little way from the land. And He sat

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<sup>4</sup> John names Thomas and Nathanael because he’s introduced them earlier in his Gospel (Jn. 1:45-51; 11:16; 14:5; 20:24-29). Perhaps, then, the “two others” of Jesus’ disciples remain unnamed because they’ve not previously been introduced. Why, then, does John bother to specify “the sons of Zebedee” who also have not previously been introduced? Why not simply refer to “four others” of Jesus’ disciples? I believe the solution is to be found in the fact that this is a narrative about *fishing*.

down and began teaching the crowds from the boat. And when He had finished speaking, He said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.” Simon answered and said, “Master, we labored all night and caught nothing, but at Your word, I will let down the nets.” And when they had done this, they enclosed a great quantity of fish. And their nets began to break; so they signaled to their partners in the other boat for them to come and help them. And they came and filled both of the boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw this, he fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!” For amazement had seized him and all his companions because of the catch of fish which they had taken, and James and John, **sons of Zebedee**, who were partners with Simon, were also likewise amazed. And Jesus said to Simon, “Do not fear, from now on you will be catching men.” And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed Him.

Here in John 21, after the resurrection of Jesus, *why* are the disciples going fishing again? What else are they supposed to do while they’re waiting to see Jesus again at the mountain that He had designated? I don’t believe this fishing expedition represents any failure on the part of the disciples. On the other hand, we *can* assume their total uncertainty about what the future holds for them. They know that Jesus is risen, and they’ve grasped something of what that means for who Jesus is, but what does this mean for their own future and for the future of Jesus the Messiah’s kingdom? This they cannot yet grasp. How can the kingdom be coming when Jesus, the King, is going away? Simon Peter said to them, “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We will also come with you.”

**III. John 21:3b** — They went out and got into the boat; and that night [night being considered one of the best times for fishing on the Sea of Galilee] they caught nothing.

We’re reminded of Peter’s response to Jesus back at the very beginning, when Jesus told him to put his boat out into the deep water and let down his nets for a catch: “Master, we labored all night and caught nothing, but at Your word, I will let down the nets” (Lk. 5:5). That turned out to be the day that Simon Peter and the Sons of Zebedee left everything to follow Jesus. But this is a very different day. The Jesus that they first left their boats and their nets to follow is now the crucified and risen Lord. And yet for all that, here they are in Simon’s boat again, casting their nets for a catch of fish. It’s a very different day, but it’s also very similar. “That night they caught nothing.”

**IV. John 21:4** — But when the day was now breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.

The last three times that Jesus has *manifested* Himself, we see the same language:

- John 20:14 — [Mary Magdalene] turned around and saw Jesus **standing** there...
- John 20:19 — While it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and while the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and **stood** in their midst...
- John 20:26 — And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and **stood** in their midst...

And now we read: “But when the day was now breaking, Jesus **stood** on the beach.” The impression John gives is that Jesus has not come there by walking. Jesus is now “the man [who] is from heaven” and who comes from the Father’s presence. How does Jesus “move” from the right hand of God to a beach in Galilee? Here is a mystery too great and too wonderful for us. And associated with this mystery is the reality that the disciples “did not know that it was Jesus.” Was it their distance from the beach (about 100 yards; 21:8) that prevented them from knowing it was Jesus? That doesn’t seem to be John’s point. We’re reminded again of Mary Magdalene: “She turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus” (Jn. 20:14; cf. Lk. 24:15-16). How, then, will Jesus *manifest Himself* to His disciples?

**V. John 21:5a** — So Jesus said to them, “Children, do you not have any fish?”

Jesus doesn’t give anything away. He doesn’t say, “It is Me, Jesus.” “Children” might have been somewhat unexpected coming from a stranger, but it wouldn’t have been as out of place in that culture as it would be in ours. What about the fact that Jesus “assumes” (knows) they don’t have any fish? Could a stranger standing on the beach assume they don’t have any fish because they’re still out on the lake when day is breaking? Jesus doesn’t give anything away, which is to say: He has *not yet* manifested Himself to the disciples.

“Children, do you not have any fish?”

**VI. John 21:5b–6a** — They answered Him, “No.” And He said to them, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” So they cast...

Why would the disciples cast on the other side of the boat at the word of a stranger on the beach? Was it the simple confidence with which the stranger spoke? Was it the certainty in his voice?

**VII. John 21:6b** — So they cast, and then they were not able to haul it in because of the great number of fish.

Jesus manifested Himself to the disciples “*in this way.*”

How can we not be reminded of that first miraculous catch of fish when Simon Peter (and his brother Andrew) and the sons of Zebedee left everything to follow Jesus? By manifesting Himself “*in this way,*” Jesus is assuring the disciples that even though He’s going away, their calling as His disciples is still the same. What did Jesus say to them after the first miraculous catch of fish?

➤ Luke 5:10 (cf. Jn. 4:35-38) — “Do not fear, *from now on* you will be catching men.”

By manifesting Himself “*in this way,*” Jesus is assuring the disciples that even though He’s going away, He will still be with them, enabling them—*as the risen Lord!*—to fulfill their calling and bear fruit for His glory.

➤ John 15:5 — “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.”

This miraculous catch of fish is more than just something amazing, or a practical provision of food or income. It's a sign of the disciples calling and the coming of the kingdom. It's a sign of the fact that Jesus will still be with His disciples, enabling and empowering them to fulfill their calling. They may not have grasped these things immediately, but given time for reflection, they would come to understand.

**VIII. John 21:7–8** — Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved [John, the author of this Gospel] said to Peter, “**It is the Lord.**” So when Simon Peter heard, “**It is the Lord,**” he put his outer garment on [or, “he tucked up his outer garment”] (for he was stripped for work), and cast himself into the sea [we'll revisit this next week]. But the other disciples came in the little boat, for they were not far from the land, but about two hundred cubits away [about one hundred yards], dragging the net full of fish.

John vividly relates what happened as one of the disciples who was there that day in the boat — and even as the one who said to Peter, “It is the Lord.”

**IX. John 21:9–10** — So when they got out on the land, they saw a charcoal fire in place and fish placed on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring from [*apo*] the fish which you have now [*nun*] caught.”

Does Jesus tell the disciples to bring fish in order to supplement the meal that He's already provided? If so,<sup>5</sup> it's important for us to see that this is never stated. The only thing Jesus says—or the only thing that we're told He says—is this: “Bring from the fish which you have *now* caught.” The main purpose of these words is to focus the disciples' attention on the miraculous catch of fish. And we see this all the more clearly when we go on to read in verse eleven:

**X. John 21:11** — Simon Peter went up and drew the net to land, full of large fish, 153; and although there were so many, the net was not torn.

John describes the result of Jesus' instruction (“bring from the fish which you have now caught”) not in terms of more fish being placed on the fire, but only in terms of the discovery of just how miraculous the catch of fish was. There's nothing symbolic about the number 153 (it's just like John to give us this detailed reminiscence of one who was there). The point is the great number of fish, all of them large fish, and the fact that even though there were so many, the net was not torn.

How different this is from that first miraculous catch of fish when we're told that “their nets began to break” (Lk. 5:6). In that case, the loss of a few fish was insignificant because the disciples were being called away from the vocation of catching fish to the vocation of catching men (cf. Mat. 13:47-48; and the boats were beginning to sink anyway). In that case, catching fish was simply a metaphor. In this case, the miraculous catch of fish is from the very beginning a sign and a symbol of their calling, and of the fact that Jesus, the risen Lord, will still be with them, empowering and enabling them to fulfill their calling. Therefore, that the net was not broken means that not one of the 153 fish were lost, reminding us of the words of Jesus:

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<sup>5</sup> Just because the catch of fish symbolizes the eschatological catch of men doesn't mean that the fish are now sacred and cannot be eaten (contra Michaels).

- John 6:39 (cf. 10:28; 18:9) — “Now this is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing...”

Maybe the disciples didn’t see these things immediately, but given time for reflection, they came to understand. The miraculous catch of fish is a sign confirming Jesus’ words to the disciples when He first came to them after His resurrection:

- John 20:21 — “Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.”

And so it’s also a sign confirming the words that Jesus will soon speak to them at the mountain that He has designated:

- Matthew 28:18–20 — “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to keep all that I commanded you; and behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Here in John 21, Jesus comes to the disciples in the moment of their greatest uncertainty and *manifests Himself* to them, assuring them that He will always be with them as their risen Lord, empowering and enabling them for the work of His kingdom. And then:

**XI. John 21:12** — Jesus said to them, “Come, have breakfast.” None of the disciples dared to question Him, “Who are You?” knowing that “**It is the Lord.**”

The word for “question” implies a careful examination or even an interrogation, a searching something out (cf. Mat. 2:8; 10:11; Acts 22:24, 29). The point, then, is that none of the disciples dared to ask Jesus: “Is it *really* You? *How* can it be You?”<sup>6</sup> Instead, the disciples remain content simply to know that “It is the *Lord*.” And now it is *the Lord* who says to them, “Come, have breakfast.”

**XII. John 21:13** — Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and the fish likewise.

The only other time that John mentions the Sea of Tiberias (21:1) is in chapter six when Jesus was the host at another meal.

- John 6:11 — Jesus then **took the loaves** [*lambano... artos (pl.)*], and having given thanks, He **distributed** [*diadidomi*] them to those who were seated; **likewise also of the fish** [*homoios... opsarion*]...

Now, in chapter 21, John echoes the language of chapter six:

- John 21:13 — Jesus came and **took the bread/loaf** [*lambano... artos (sing.)*] and **gave** [*didomi*] it to them, **and the fish likewise** [*opsarion homoios*].

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Matthew 28:16–17 — [T]he eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated. And when they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some wavered [the point is not so much that they doubted that Jesus was resurrected, but that they doubted whether this was really the Jesus they had known].



If the miraculous catch of fish was the sign that Jesus, their risen Lord, would still be with them, enabling and empowering them for His kingdom work, then this meal that Jesus provides is the sign that He will still be with them, providing for all their needs and calling them to enjoy sweet fellowship and communion with Himself (cf. Acts 10:40-41). In chapter 20, we read:

➤ John 20:19 — Jesus **came** and stood in their midst...

And again:

➤ John 20:26 — Jesus **came**... and stood in their midst...

And now we read: “Jesus **came** and took the bread and gave it to them, and the fish likewise.” Why does John use this language here? Because he sees Jesus manifesting Himself not just in the miraculous catch of fish, but in the meal that He hosts. Jesus comes to the disciples in the moment of their greatest uncertainty and *manifests Himself* to them. So John concludes:

**XIII. John 21:14** — This is now the third time that Jesus was *manifested* to the disciples, after He was raised from the dead.

Three times we’ve seen these words: “It is the Lord.” “It is the Lord”—the *risen* Lord—who enables and empowers us for the work of His kingdom; and we are all kingdom workers. “It is the Lord”—the *risen* Lord—who provides for us and cares for us and who calls us into fellowship with Himself. “It is the Lord”—the *risen* Lord—who is with us, “even to the end of the age.”